
Stroke

Reducing Risk and Recognizing Symptoms

Stroke is a brain attack!

Stroke is a “brain attack” which cuts off vital blood and oxygen to the brain cells that control everything we do - from speaking, to walking, to breathing. Most strokes occur when arteries are blocked by blood clots or by the gradual build-up of plaque and other fatty deposits. Some strokes can be caused by arteries rupturing when weak spots on the blood vessel wall break.

Every year, stroke strikes approximately 750,000 Americans - killing 160,000 and forever changing the lives of many who survive. The good news is that many strokes can be prevented. If you do have a stroke, new treatments can help stop the brain damage and disability, if you know the symptoms and get immediate attention.

Reducing Risk

Everyone has some stroke risk. A few stroke risk factors are beyond your control, such as being over age 55, being a male, being an African-American, having diabetes, and having a family history of stroke. If you have one of these risk factors, it is even more important that you learn about the lifestyle and medical changes you can make to prevent a stroke.

Medical stroke risk factors include:

Previous stroke, previous episode of transient ischemic attack or “TIA,” high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart disease, atrial fibrillation and carotid artery disease. These medical risk factors can be controlled. Talk with your doctor about what will work best for you.

Lifestyle stroke risk factors include:

Smoking, being overweight and drinking too much alcohol. You can control these lifestyle risk factors by quitting smoking, exercising regularly, watching what and how much you eat, and limiting alcohol consumption.

National Stroke Association's Stroke Prevention Guidelines

1. **Know your blood pressure.** If it is elevated, work with your doctor to keep it under control. High blood pressure is a leading cause of stroke. Have your blood pressure checked at least once each year, more often if you have a history of high blood pressure. Consult your doctor if the higher number (your systolic blood pressure) is usually over 120, or if the lower number (your diastolic blood pressure) is usually over 80.
 2. **Find out if you have atrial fibrillation** (also called AF). If you have AF, work with your doctor to manage it. Atrial fibrillation can cause blood to collect in the chambers of your heart. This blood can form clots and cause a stroke. Your doctor can detect AF by carefully checking your pulse.
 3. **If you smoke, stop.** Smoking doubles the risk for stroke. If you stop smoking today, your risk for stroke will begin to decrease.
 4. **If you drink alcohol, do so in moderation.** Drinking a glass of wine or beer or one drink each day may lower your risk for stroke (provided that there is no other medical reason you should avoid alcohol). Remember that alcohol is a drug - it can interact with other drugs you are taking, and alcohol is harmful if taken in large doses. If you don't drink, don't start.
 5. **Know your cholesterol number.** If it is high, work with your doctor to control it. Lowering your cholesterol may reduce your risk for stroke. High cholesterol can also indirectly increase stroke risk by putting you at greater risk of heart disease - an important stroke risk factor. Often times, high cholesterol can be controlled with diet and exercise; some individuals may require medication.
 6. If you are diabetic, follow your doctor's recommendations carefully to **control your diabetes**. Having diabetes puts you at an increased risk for stroke. Your doctor can prescribe a nutrition program, lifestyle changes and medicine that can help control your diabetes.
 7. **Include exercise in the activities you enjoy in your daily routine.** A brisk walk, swim or other exercise activity for as little as 30 minutes a day can improve your health in many ways, and may reduce your risk for stroke.
 8. **Enjoy a lower sodium (salt), lower fat diet.** By cutting down on sodium and fat in your diet, you may be able to lower your blood pressure and, most importantly, lower your risk for stroke.
 9. **Ask your doctor if you have circulation problems.** If so, work with your doctor to control them. Fatty deposits can block the arteries which carry blood from your heart to your brain. This kind of blockage can cause stroke. Sickle cell disease, severe anemia, or other diseases can cause stroke if left untreated.
 10. **If you have any stroke symptoms, seek immediate medical attention.**
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Recognizing Symptoms

Few Americans know the symptoms of stroke. Learning them and knowing what to do when they occur could save your life.

Common stroke symptoms include:

- Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg – especially on one side of the body
- Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding
- Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes
- Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination
- Sudden severe headache with no known cause

Stroke is an Emergency!

Call 911 if you see or have any of these symptoms. Treatment can be more effective if given early on in the ambulance. Every minute counts!

Special note: If symptoms appear for only a very short period of time and then disappear, it could mean a Transient Ischemic Attack or TIA. It's important to call 911 whenever you experience any stroke symptom. While TIA's are not strokes, they indicate serious underlying stroke risks and are a powerful warning that a full stroke may soon follow.

Getting emergency medical treatment is important for several reasons. Only a doctor can tell for sure if you are having a stroke or a TIA. If you are having a stroke, emergency medical treatment could save your life and greatly improve your chances for successful rehabilitation and recovery. If you are having a TIA, your doctor will evaluate and treat the underlying causes. Following your doctor's orders for medication and treatment can help reduce your risk of having a stroke.

Heart Disease &
Stroke Prevention

Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals

(225) 342-8094

www.laheart.dhh.louisiana.gov
